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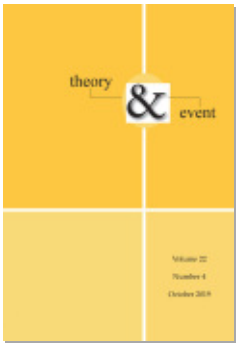

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Abstract Most historiographical accounts of the Berlin uprising of January 1919 depict it as a failed repetition of the Russian October, framing the Spartacists as twin brothers of the Bolsheviks and Rosa Luxemburg as the German counterpart to Lenin. Furio Jesi's 1969 work, *Spartacus. The Symbology of Revolt* invites an alternative reading of the event, highlighting the difference between "revolution" and "revolt" as contrasting experiences of time. This article explores the connection between the Berlin uprising and the slave revolts of antiquity, using a concept coined by Walter Benjamin, "the tradition of the oppressed," in order to understand the role of myth in modern revolutionary movements.

Introduction

This article analyzes the role of myths and symbols in modernity through the lens of two historical events separated by almost two thousand years: the slave revolts of ancient Rome and the Berlin uprising of January 1919. It argues that the summoning of the name of Spartacus by the *Spartakusbund*—a radical-left group operating in Germany during World War I—operated a distinctive break with the historical imagination of the modern workers movement, revealing a distinctive understanding of revolutionary politics. Inspired by the work of Nicole Loraux and Jacques Rancière, the article engages with the concept of "anachronism" in order to conceptualize a history of class struggle that is not tied to a linear conception of time. Making use of Furio Jesi's distinction between "revolt" and "revolution" as contrasting experiences of time, it proposes an interpretation of the Berlin uprising as a messianic event.

The first section of the article argues that the political culture of the worker's movement reflected a historical narrative inherited from the Enlightenment, one in which any connection between ancient slavery and modern wage-work was almost completely suppressed. It proceeds to analyze the writings of Furio Jesi and Walter Benjamin, using the notion of a "tradition of the oppressed" to elaborate an alter-

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nate genealogy of class struggle. The second section looks to the slave revolts of antiquity in order to understand how Spartacus became a metonymic symbol of rebellious slaves and a mythological archetype. The third section offers a reading of the Berlin uprising of January 1919 as a "messianic" event, questioning the dominant trend of historical interpretation that presents it as a failed repetition of the October Revolution. The concluding section summarizes the main arguments of this interpretation of ancient and modern revolts, highlighting the connection between temporality and political agency, as well as the role of myths and symbols in the configuration of historical events.

1. Myth and temporality: the "tradition of the oppressed"

Mythical figures from antiquity were a common literary trope in early modern Europe, during which time Heracles stood as a symbol of state power and the Hydra of Lerma as a metaphor for political sedition.[1] It was also not unusual for Conservatives to use Roman aristocrats as role models, or for Radicals to draw inspiration from the politics of the Roman plebs.[2] Marx was very much in accord with the spirit of his time when, inspired by Marat, he used the unproductive figure of the Roman *proletarii* to conceptualize the modern working class, even though a few years later, in a letter written to Engels, he described Spartacus as a "genuine representative of the ancient proletariat."[3] This apparent paradox illustrates a semantic problem associated with modern appropriations of ancient terms. As Jacques Rancière observes, in the course of the nineteenth century the "proletariat" came to name both an "historical agent" and the conceptualization of a "rupture with the temporal logic of production and reproduction."[4] But it also highlights a defining aspect of the political culture of the classical worker's movement, namely, the tendency of Socialist authors to seek inspiration from the plebs" struggle for political recognition, rather than from the resistance of slaves to forced labor. This is all the more striking when one considers the constitutive role played by slavery, along with other forms of forced labor, in primitive capitalist accumulation.[5] From the seventeenth century onward, all across the emergent Atlantic plantation economy we find individuals subjected to nominally different conditions of exploitation joining together in struggle against their common oppressors.[6] Additionally, legal debates during the nineteenth Century established a direct connection between the punitive role of the "prison-form" and the disciplinary apparatus surrounding the "wage-form."[7] If coercion was easily understood as a defining feature of political economy, why did the relation between slavery and wage-labor remain almost entirely absent from the political discourse of the worker's movement? One possible explanation is that the choice of a plebeian genealogy allowed Socialists to depict wage workers as

citizens, thereby countering the negative image associated with the "dangerous classes."[8] Another, very similar one, would point to influence of Enlightenment ideals on the historical imagination of Socialists, who drew a great deal of inspiration from its narrative of "progress."

A good example can be found in a 1919 lecture delivered by Lenin at Sverdlov University. Portraying the history of class struggle as a linear process compartmentalized in stages, Lenin highlighted the fact that Spartacus had been able to lead a "widespread uprising of slaves" against "the seemingly omnipotent Roman Empire." However, Lenin argued, since it was "capitalism alone" which "enabled the oppressed proletarian class to become conscious of itself and to create the world working-class movement," ancient slaves "could not clearly realize what their aims were" and therefore remained "pawns in the hands of the ruling classes."[9] For most Marxists, the slave revolts of antiquity were predominantly defined by what they lacked—a "class party" and a "class consciousness"—and therein resided the explanation for their defeat. This reading of history was not without consequences. A few months later, while arguing for the militarization of labor, Trotsky characterized Soviet Russia as a "Proletarian Sparta"—an association with a distinctive Jacobin precedent—thereby converting the dictatorship of the proletariat into the inheritor of a slave-owning class.[10]

It is well known that "Jacobinism" was an enduring source of inspiration for Lenin.[11] Even though his political thought suffered variations—particularly after reading Hegel's *Logic*[12]—in June 1917 he still equated Jacobinism with the rule of the proletariat, which, "supported by the peasant poor and taking advantage of the existing material basis for advancing to socialism," could not only "provide all the great, ineradicable, unforgettable things provided by the Jacobins in the eighteenth century" but also "bring about a lasting world-wide victory for the working people."[13] This was not merely an acknowledgment of the specific character of the Russian social formation, with its "combined and uneven development." It also expressed a philosophy of history in which "socialism" appeared as the offspring of the Enlightenment, with the proletariat taking up the progressive heritage of the bourgeoisie to carry out its own emancipation. By imagining the Russian Revolution as a re-enactment and logical continuation of the French Revolution, the Bolsheviks adopted a rigid understanding of historical time, which determined what was possible or impossible, convenient or inconvenient in any given moment.[14] Since it was assumed that history followed a pre-determined course, according to a set of unchanging rules that could be "scientifically" identified, the political agency of the working class had to be subordinated to an organized vanguard capable of managing the conceptual tools of Marxism in order to accelerate the passage of one mode of production to the other. Jacobins were an example to be emulated, because they had performed

the tasks of the "bourgeois revolution" with the same firm commitment that the Bolsheviks considered to be necessary in order to build socialism in Russia. It was far from accidental that, on her first polemics with Lenin, in 1904, Rosa Luxemburg argued passionately against this Jacobin inspiration, emphasizing the capacity of the working class to self-organize and conduct its own political struggle, without obeying a pre-determined historical script.[15] By choosing Spartacus as an archetype during World War I, the circle gathered around her and Karl Liebknecht was, as we shall see, pursuing an entirely different horizon, both in terms of historical interpretation and of political strategy.

This brings us to the topic of "temporality," the main subject of *Spartakus*, a "study of myths and symbols" written by Furio Jesi. By distinguishing revolt—a "sudden insurrectional explosion," which could be "placed within a strategic horizon," but didn't necessarily imply "a long-distance strategy"—from revolution—a "strategic complex of insurrectionary movements, coordinated and oriented over the mid to long-term towards ultimate objectives"—Jesi characterized the Berlin uprising of January 1919 as a "suspension of historical time," lying in the intersection between myth and history.[16] By summoning the name of Spartacus, he argued, the insurgents had evoked the "epiphany of a mythical time," activating its subversive memory in the course of their own revolt.[17] *Spartakus* is a palimpsest with different levels of interpretation, a text that offers a code to decipher the historical meaning of the Berlin uprising and, simultaneously, poses a challenge to its readers, demanding that we look further into the subjects of myth and temporality. Indeed, Jesi's conception of myth cannot be understood without taking into account a tradition of research extending back to the nineteenth century, with which he kept an ongoing dialogue.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche underlined the fact that the ancient Greeks were "compelled to connect everything they experienced, immediately and involuntarily, to their myths" in such a way that "even the most immediate present was bound to appear to them straight away *sub specie aeterni* and, in a certain sense, as timeless."[18] Mircea Eliade developed this idea in his studies of myth, arguing that all "archaic" cultures were dominated by a cyclical temporality, in which only those events that mirrored eternity itself were considered worthy of remembrance.[19] The living experience of such societies was structured around rituals and archetypes that recalled actions performed *in illo tempore* by individuals of a divine or semi-divine nature, while the profane time of History was relegated to an inferior level.[20] The Hungarian philologist Karl Kerényi also grounded his "science of myth" in the notion of the "archetype."[21] An important source of inspiration to Jesi, Kerényi established a fundamental distinction between "genuine" and "technicized myth": whereas the first resulted from the

experience of immediate contact with the sacred, standing outside of history and beyond language itself, the latter belonged to the realm of the profane and could be seen as an equivalent to modern political propaganda.[22]

Radicalizing these assertions, Jesi coined the concept of "mythological machine" to describe the tension between "myth," which he placed outside of history, in the "emptiness that exists between the divine and the human," and "mythology" which he described as a concrete set of narrative devices located in a specific historical context, that simultaneously offered myths a concrete substance and captured them within its confines.[23] Even though these hypothesis were still being forged when Jesi first wrote *Spartakus*, they can help us understand why, rather than denouncing the artificiality of "technicized myth," Jesi carefully aligns the notion of "genuine myth" with that of "genuine propaganda," arguing that "in the moments of greatest political fervor, when political commitment has conditioned the authenticity of the experience of life," propaganda can serve as "the very definition of truth."[24] Indeed, as he would add a few pages later, only the readiness "to commit oneself totally ("rationally" and "irrationally") to the struggle" could testify to the truth of one's political convictions, which is why he considered that the choices made by the Berlin insurgents of 1919 demonstrated that "their propaganda was genuine, in other words, that it did not rely on deformed myths and that it had become, instead, an authentic language of truth."[25]

If previous works on "Myth" help us to understand why Jesi opted to approach the Berlin uprising from the perspective of temporality, the influence of Jewish messianism is no less important. As Gershom Scholem has noted, although the Jewish messianic tradition was marked by a permanent tension between restoration and utopianism, the mythology developed by biblical prophets operated a profound break with traditional cyclical temporality.[26] In it, the "apocalypse" was understood as an irreversible suspension of historical time, one that would bring redemption to humankind. By inverting the traditional structure of myth, displacing divine intervention from the past into the future, messianic prophecy creates a peculiar sort of temporality, in which the present was conceived of as an anticipation rather than a repetition. Scholem's study would later inspire his friend Walter Benjamin's celebrated theses in *On the Concept of History,* wherein Benjamin attacks the "linear, homogenous and empty" conception of time embodied in the notion of "progress," establishing a connection between the notion of historical inevitability and the attitude of political conformism typical of German social democracy. In short, Benjamin called for a "messianic arrest of happening" capable of disrupting the continuum of history:

> The subject of historical knowledge is the struggling, oppressed class itself. Marx presents it as the last enslaved class—the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden. This conviction, which had a brief resurgence in the Spartacus League, has always been objectionable to Social Democrats. Within three decades they managed to erase the name of Blanqui almost entirely, though at the sound of that name the preceding century had quaked. The Social Democrats preferred to cast the working class in the role of a redeemer of *future* generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This indoctrination made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than by the ideal of liberated grandchildren.[27]

The essay written by Jesi gains a deeper, more precise, tonality once we read it under this light. Not only did the invocation of Spartacus establish a different genealogy for the modern working class—depicting it as "the last enslaved class"—it also presupposed a specific notion of history, defined by Benjamin as the "tradition of the oppressed." While "historicism" was based on the idea of a linear progression of time, with conventional historical narratives invariably reflecting the views of the victors of class struggle, Benjamin identified the act of "remembrance" with the possibility of fighting for "the oppressed past," understanding each historical moment as a "constellation saturated with tensions." By summoning the image of the "enslaved ancestors," the *Spartakusbund* was charging its own historical present with "splinters of messianic time," through an act of anachronism that subverted conventional temporality and enabled it to speak "an authentic language of truth."

Jesi's *Spartakus*—which was not, as he was careful to stress, a historical account of the Berlin uprising—establishes a number of connections between two sets of events with no apparent relation to one another, inviting us to travel back and forth between antiquity and modernity. As the rest of this article will argue, the actions undertaken in the streets of Berlin in 1919 were inseparable from a messianic conception of time, through which Spartacus was resuscitated as an historical archetype. But before we uncover the conditions permitting this "epiphany of mythical time" to occur, we must first look at the slave revolts of antiquity, to understand what converted them into such a powerful mythological material.

2. "Enslaved Ancestors": The Specter of Spartacus

In his reflections on *Politics*, Aristotle defines slaves as "talking instruments" and "living possessions," according to the unwritten law by

which the spoils of war belong to the victor.[28] This connection between war and slavery was an undisputed fact in the ancient Mediterranean, since armed conflict provided a constant flow of prisoners to be auctioned in specialized markets and employed in all sorts of work. Far from being an isolated judgment, the definition put forth by Aristotle was common amongst the Greek and Roman upper classes, at a time in which slavery pervaded most domains of life. But, on certain occasions, war could also open wide fissures along the social fabric, creating favorable conditions for slaves to rise up.

The unexpected role that slaves could play in these situations was not lost on the historians of the time. Writing about the *stasis* in Corcyra during the Peloponnesian War of the fifth century BCE, Thucydides notes that both the democratic and the oligarchic faction promised to free the slaves who helped them achieve victory.[29] A few years later, the Messenian exiles of Naupactus—a group of slaves ("helots") that had risen against the Spartans in 464 BCE—fought alongside the Athenians, helping them to build fortresses in Pylos and Cythera in order to allow other runaway helots to escape.[30] The Spartans would repay in kind, establishing a fortress in Attica, Decelea, where runaway slaves from the Athenian mines could find refuge. Almost three centuries later, in the first book of his *Histories*, Polybius narrated the "truceless war" fought between Carthage and its mercenaries shortly after the First Punic War. A mutiny of unpaid soldiers aroused the rebellion of slaves in the African countryside, while an army of insurgents led by Spendius (a Campanian slave) and Matho (a Libian mercenary) laid siege to the city itself before it was eventually defeated.

The slave revolts of the late Roman Republic followed a different pattern. The uprising led by Spartacus in 73–71 BCE was the last of a cycle of rebellions originating in Sicily in 135–132 BCE, and which were resumed between 104–100 BCE. Ancient sources provide a lively account of these revolts, with Diodorus Siculus describing the events in Sicilia, while Plutarch, Appian and Sallust wrote about the rebellion led by Spartacus.[31] But not only are these accounts fragmentary, as the literary conventions and philosophical traditions of the age render the motivations and perspectives of the insurgents extremely hard to grasp. A recent historical work, written by Aldo Schiavone, moves beyond the narrow limits of ancient sources, shedding a peculiar light upon Spartacus.[32] Before moving to that specific topic, however, a general overview of this cycle of revolts is required.

A striking feature of the rebellions was the velocity with which they spread, catalyzed by an initial nucleus of insurgent slaves who circulated around the countryside, drawing thousands of others into the fight. The fact that slaves were usually employed to deliver messages helped to propagate the movement, with the two Sicilian uprisings reverberating all the way into Attica, inciting the slaves who worked

in the Athenian mines to revolt.[33] It is worth noting that, even though the Sicilian uprisings adopted very elaborate institutional frameworks, and their leaders exhibited traditional symbols of authority from Hellenistic political culture (dressing in purple, wearing crowns or scepters, issuing coin, building palaces), slavery appears to have been abolished within the rebellious communities. Apart from a brief reference made by Diodorus Siculus to the inhabitants of the city of Enna, who were put in chains to manufacture arms for the insurgents, along with an occasion in which Spartacus forced three hundred Roman prisoners to fight to the death, in a mock gladiator show, we find little evidence that this institution was preserved in the context of the uprisings. On the contrary, there are numerous references to the efforts undertaken by the insurgents to liberate other slaves, if only for pragmatic reasons, related to the need to attract more fighters to their ranks.

The revolts gathered slaves from different geographic and cultural origins, with Gauls, Germans, Thracians, Greeks and Syrians (a designation which encompassed all those from the eastern shore of the Mediterranean) forming the most numerous contingents. There was a predominance of "chattel-slaves" from the Sicilian and Campanian countryside, where violent forms of submission and heavy labor loads were the rule. Herdsman also took on an important role, since they enjoyed freedom of movements and were permitted to carry weapons to defend their flocks, besides having a good knowledge of the countryside and mountainous areas wherein rebellious slaves sought refuge. Gladiators formed a specific category of slaves, since they were trained fighters, usually with previous military background, being better fed and lodged, but also had to submit to a harsher discipline. It was not infrequent for relatively privileged categories of slaves, such as the *villicus* (administrator) of the large estates, to participate in the revolts, which also attracted a considerable number of landless freeman. By contrast, the uprisings gained considerably less support among urban slaves.

As for the perceivable mindset of the insurgents, many authors point to a relation between the cult of Dionysius and the formation of a rebellious slave culture, which prompted the Roman Senate to forbid the practice of *bacchanalia*, those orgiastic celebrations wherein established social boundaries—separating the living from the dead, man from woman and freeman from slaves—were collectively transgressed. The outbreak of the revolts was also associated with messianic messages. Ancient sources tell us that the uprisings in Sicily were conducted by a certain Eunus, Salvius and Athenion, individuals of Syrian and Cilician background who had the gift of prophetic vision. Plutarch also claims that the wife of Spartacus (a Thracian like him) was a priestess of Dionysius who possessed prophetic powers and

interpreted omens. This allows us to imagine a loose intertwining of diffuse beliefs and cultural representations in which different symbolic and religious elements merged within a common narrative capable of binding individuals across a range of cultural backgrounds and inspiring them to struggle against slave-owners and Roman authorities.

The leadership ability and military knowledge of Spartacus clearly stands out in most accounts. However, the main difference between the *bellum Spartacium* and previous revolts resided not only in the role played by gladiators or in the charisma of its leader, but also in its geographical location in the Italian mainland. It was apparently easier to crush the rebellion at its start, by sending troops down the Appian road in the direction of Capua, the main center for gladiator training at the time, where the uprising commenced. But once the revolt spread and swelled to several thousands, it presented a much more serious threat to Roman power. From its very beginning, when less than a hundred gladiators sought refuge in Mount Vesuvius, with the only exit blocked by a much larger Roman army, the tale of Spartacus appeared to be destined to become the stuff of myth. Not only that, the image of rebellious slaves erupting out of a volcano, climbing down its slopes using intertwined vines and falling upon Roman soldiers under the cover of the night conjured powerful images from Roman mythology.[34] Next thing you know, there was an army of slaves roaming around Italy, organized according to ranks and subject to a strict military discipline, capable of repeatedly defeating Roman legions in pitched battle. By the summer of 72 BCE, if we follow the hypothesis put forth by Schiavone, Spartacus was ready to see himself as an "armed prophet," called upon to repeat and surpass the deeds of Hannibal.[35] We know little about how Spartacus framed his own actions, or what sort of collective goal the insurgents pursued, but if we accept the possibility that they were not simply attempting to get back to their home countries and wanted to attack Rome itself—a plausible hypothesis, particularly after they found a way open towards Cisalpine Gaul, but decided to march south instead—we can imagine their actions to be motivated by a more ambitious calculation. Realizing that the Roman legions would pose a continuous threat, the slaves led by Spartacus may have established a connection between collective emancipation, resistance to foreign occupation and the destruction of Rome. It is likewise plausible that all of this fitted into a prophetic layout, just as it had occurred in Sicily a few decades before, aligning the deeds of Spartacus with the thread of an older messianic message.

This brings us to the crucial matter of whether we can see the ancient slaves as forbears of the modern working class, part of a "tradition of the oppressed." Although this article is mainly concerned with the ways in which Spartacus would latter operate as a symbol,

it is worth considering the terms of historiographical debate on the subject. Schiavone argues at length against the framing of slave revolts under the category of "class struggle," considering this to be a specifically modern "model of conflict and collective subjectivity" that cannot be transposed "backward in time to explain Rome or Greece."[36] A similar argument was developed by Moses Finley, who dismissed the notion of "class struggle" in antiquity, sustaining that "conflicts between groups" gravitated around the "distribution of specific rights and privileges," and that the slaves who revolted were only concerned "with themselves and their status," not with "slavery as an institution."[37]

Certainly, we need to be cautious when employing the concept of "class struggle," not only because we know little about the actual motivations of the slaves who participated in the revolts, but also because we risk reducing the complexity of Roman society to a teleological model of historical interpretation. In this regard, the warning laid out by Nicole Loraux, against the inclination to populate the ancient city with "industrialists," "financiers," "proletarians," remains entirely valid.[38] But all the same, we possess no other comparably consistent theoretical tool for understanding the dynamics of social stratification, power and conflict in and across different historical contexts. We can therefore follow the suggestion of Geoffrey de la Croix, and use "class" as a relationship of exploitation subject to historical variations, with the connection between ownership of land and control over forced labor emerging as a defining aspect of "class struggle" in the ancient Mediterranean.[39]

Once we move beyond a narrow understanding of "class struggle," and cease looking for clear evidence of a "class consciousness," the slave revolts of antiquity appear in a very different light. Rather than a static and timeless social structure, the late Roman Republic may be regarded at once as the culmination of old patterns of exploitation and simultaneously as a dramatic historical moment, in which class antagonism boiled up with the full weight of its disruptive force. Schiavone himself points in that direction, when he notes that, even though commodity production was limited to a small part of the economy of the ancient Mediterranean, the first century BCE bore witness to an unprecedented level of wealth accumulation, concentration of property, and surplus production based on slave labor:

> In the mindset of the dominant elites, slavery had become by far the most prevalent paradigm of wealth-generating manual labor. Production meant production by means of slaves. [...] The reification of bodies—often branded with fire like ceramics or cattle—was accompanied by an annihilating pressure that no economic rationality could fully explain. Frequently it was due simply to

> a lack of measure and to a relentlessness on the part of the masters, springing from a mechanism of exploitation and dominion which, on that scale, was unprecedented and had no ethical or social points of reference. Nothing like it had ever existed until then. It was in this way that the Mediterranean became not only a sea of commodities and markets, but also a sea of slaves, commodities themselves just like any other—and, for a period of time, of slaves in revolt.[40]

Categories like "reification," "exploitation" or "commodities" suggest that the kinship between the slaves of antiquity and the modern working class is more than symbolic. And even though the ancients did not possess the notion of "abstract human labor," the mechanisms employed to convert the ancient Mediterranean into a sea of commodities were not entirely different from those which made capitalist accumulation possible. Once we enlarge our concept of "class struggle," a hidden connection between antiquity and modernity emerges, comprising common patterns of resistance and rebellion, and directed against similar mechanisms of oppression and exploitation. In this sense, the slave uprising led by Spartacus was a direct attack against the political economy of the ancient Mediterranean, including the combination of *panem et circenses* that allowed the patrician elite to keep the urban plebs under control.

For more than two years, the greatest power in the Mediterranean suffered successive defeats against an army to whom even the statute of a legitimate opponent was refused. This posed an unprecedented challenge for an archaic culture dominated by notions of stability and continuity, caught between the novelty of empire and the conservatism of tradition. A considerable amount of time passed before the Roman senate would finally acknowledge the importance of this seditious threat against the established order. Crassus, a rich politician, was granted full power to deal with the rebellious slaves, while Pompeius and Lucullus were ordered to return from their military expeditions oversees to help him. Confronted by the entire Roman military machine, the army led by Spartacus was forced on to the defensive, renouncing its attack on Rome, before eventually suffering a crushing defeat in a pitched battle. Brutal punishment followed, with thousands of prisoners being crucified along the road connecting Capua to Rome, as a cautionary example to other slaves. Crassus was not, however, entitled to stage a triumph after his victory, since slaves in revolt were not considered to be legitimate military enemies. Presumably dead, the body of Spartacus was never found, contributing even further to his conversion into a mythical archetype, a specter that would haunt the imagination of the Roman upper classes long after his death.[41] The memory of Spartacus persisted because his actions disrupted the common experi-

ence of time, opening a seemingly unprecedented horizon of possibilities, only briefly glimpsed before they vanished almost completely. His name came to symbolize an unfulfilled prophecy of collective emancipation, the "fragile messianic hope" which Benjamin placed at the heart of the "tradition of the oppressed." It would take centuries before this remembrance was revived by other protagonists facing equally unfavorable odds. During World War I, as if time had folded upon itself, the specter of Spartacus erupted again onto the stage of history.

3. January 1919 and the suspension of historical time

If "Jacobinism" was an enduring source of inspiration for Lenin and other Marxists, "Bolshevism" would acquire a similar status after the October Revolution. Since Russia was a relatively backward social formation, the Bolsheviks counted on the support of the industrial proletariat of western Europe to pursue a "world revolution" against the capitalist system, identifying Germany as its epicenter. The imminent prospect of a German Revolution consequently acquired an enormous importance within their historical narrative, one that we may designate, resorting to Jesi, as the "mythology of Bolshevism." This mythology was marked by varying levels of sophistication, ranging from Leon Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* to *The History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union,* commissioned by Josef Stalin, but some common tropes can nonetheless be singled out. Within this system of myths and symbols, a political organization—"the Party"—was invested with the role of conscious interpreter of an unconscious process, embodying the determination to act according to a script dictated by "history" itself. Since, according to a consecrated metaphor, violence was "the midwife of history," insurrections were regarded as a sort of caesarean incision, to be conducted with scientific precision and technical efficiency. The seizure of power in Petrograd offered an ideal type for all revolutionaries, while the notion of "insurrection as an art" found its ultimate justification in the "trial of history" itself, a domain over which the Bolsheviks had ambitious claims. The writings of Victor Serge and Gyorgy Lukács, who were simultaneously sympathizers of Rosa Luxemburg and late-comers into Bolshevism, framed the Berlin uprising according to these ideas. On the fourth anniversary of the Berlin uprising, while working clandestinely in Germany, Victor Serge wrote a late obituary to Liebknecht and Luxemburg:

> Since 1919, January 15 has become a day of mourning for revolutionaries all round the world. On January 15, 1919, the young German revolution was beheaded and the fate of the European revolution was compromised by the double murder of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. Nothing of that day must be

> forgotten. The class war goes on. We must remember what the enemy did, what it is still capable of. […] Social Democracy understood only too well that a class that has been beheaded is halfway to defeat […] Let us think of this on the day of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. We must remember what the enemy is capable of. In the crime of January 15, 1919, there is a great historical lesson.[42]

By depicting the working class as a decapitated body, Serge was, perhaps unconsciously, drawing a political metaphor from antiquity, wherein the image of the body was employed to legitimize inequality and the division between the rulers and the ruled.[43] His secularized martyrology was accompanied by a "great historical lesson," painting the line dividing Communists and Social Democrats with blood. However great it might have been, the historical lesson wouldn't last out the year, since the *Komintern* adopted a "united front" strategy in its Third Congress, and the German Communist Party (KPD) allied itself with the Social Democrat Party (SPD) in September 1923, joining the local governments of Saxony and Thuringia with the aim of arming the proletariat for an upcoming (and utterly failed) insurrection. As Serge put it, Communists did not "look at history fatalistically," and "victory" or "defeat" remained the ultimate measure for any strategic or tactical choice.

Also in 1923, the Hungarian philosopher Gyorgy Lukács was developing a similar line of argument. In an earlier writing, dated from 1921, Lukács had praised Rosa Luxemburg for grasping the "spontaneous nature of revolutionary mass actions earlier and more clearly than many others." He added that even though she had "theoretically" predicted the defeat of the January rising "years before it took place," and "tactically" foreseen it "at the moment of action," she nevertheless "remained consistently on the side of the masses and shared their fate."[44] But only two years later, Lukács accused Rosa Luxemburg of overestimating the "spontaneous, elemental forces of the Revolution" and "exaggerating utopian expectations," arguing that only a party that was "sufficiently adaptable, flexible and independent in judgement of the actual forces at work", capable of carrying out "sudden changes of front," could successfully lead the proletariat to victory.[45] On the long run, the official texts approved by the *Komintern* would become little more than a dogmatic collection of quotes written to legitimize the periodic turns of Soviet foreign policy. But even from an early stage, when Bolshevism was still characterized by vibrant intellectual activity, the Berlin uprising stood as an example of what was not to be done.[46] It is also worth noting that the depiction of the Berlin uprising as a "day of mourning" caused by exaggerated "utopian expectations" tends to dominate historiographical accounts, thereby

illustrating the lasting influence of the mythology of Bolshevism.[47] The following pages move in a different direction, using the notion of the "messianic event" as an alternative interpretative key to approach the uprising, thereby rescuing it from the martyrology of a "failed revolution."

The *Spartakusbriefe* ("Spartacus's letters") begin being published in January 1916 by a small, underground network of dissidents from the SPD, who would eventually adopt the name *Spartkusbund*. Even though they firmly opposed the war—some of them participated in the Zimmerwald Conference alongside the Bolsheviks, in 1915—the Spartacists had little experience of clandestine action. They lacked a proper apparatus, and their most distinguished members, such as Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, Franz Mehring or Leo Jogische, spent a lot of time in prison for their public interventions against the war.[48] In addition, they remained within the SPD until 1917, at which point they joined other (considerably more moderate) Social Democrat dissidents in the newly-created Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD). Therefore, even though their persistent agitation against the war offered them considerable prestige amongst sectors of the working class, the Spartacists had little in the way of organized intervention or political influence inside the factories. As for the choice of the name *Spartakus*, the writings of Rosa Luxemburg offer a plausible explanation. In *The Accumulation of Capital*, published in 1913, she had anticipated that the rhythm of capitalist accumulation was bound to slow down, prophesizing an era of crisis and war:

> Imperialism is as much a historical method for prolonging capital's existence as it is the surest way of setting an objective limit to its existence as fast as possible. This is not to say that the final point need actually be attained. The very tendency of capitalist development towards this end is expressed in forms which make the concluding phase of capitalism a period of catastrophes.[49]

This historical diagnosis motivated the sharp critique of militarism by the left-wing of German social democracy. As the armed conflict dragged on, causing an enormous death toll on the front and increasing deprivation in the rear, class struggle polarized German society, with workers being subjected to increasing surveillance and all sorts of repressive measures, including forced labor for those who went on strike or denounced the war.[50] Simultaneously, thousands of Belgians, Polish and Russian war prisoners were submitted to forced labor, while others were simply deported to industrial areas inside of Germany. The experience of war operated a deep disruption in the "normal" order of things, thereby radicalizing class struggle. The image of the German ruling classes attempting to solve problems of

accumulation through foreign conquest, while submitting foreign war prisoners to constrained labor, suddenly made Roman antiquity appear as an obvious historical precedent, a past charged with "now-time," as Benjamin would put it. It was in this specific historical context that Spartacus emerged as an archetype of rebellion.

Luxemburg's writings acquired an increasingly messianic tone once the Kaiser was forced to abdicate, in November 1918. In an article written days after her release from jail, she conjured the image of the "Acheron in motion" to describe the "appearance on the scene of the social class struggle."[51] In mid-December, she claimed that "the final battle deciding the continuation or the abolition of exploitation" was imminent, and would be a "turning point in human history."[52] Such apocalyptic imagery was rendered explicit in the program she drafted for the German Communist Party (KDP), entitled *What Does Spartacus Want?*:

> With the conclusion of world war, the class rule of the bourgeoisie has forfeited its right to existence. [...] Only the revolution of the world proletariat can bring order into this chaos, can bring work and bread for all, can end the reciprocal slaughter of the peoples, can restore peace, freedom, true culture to this martyred humanity. [...] In this hour, socialism is the only salvation for humanity.[53]

Adding to this messianic tone, and perhaps not entirely unrelated to it, Luxemburg repeatedly employed the term "wage slavery." This was strikingly at odds with the prevalent tradition of the worker's movement, well summarized by the Social Democrat Chancellor Ebert, who argued that "socialism" simply meant "hard work." Moving away from this vulgar conception of political economy, the KPD program echoed concerns previously laid out by Marx in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*. More importantly, it expressed the viewpoint of workers confronted with increasingly accelerated work rhythms and brutal patterns of exploitation, particularly in the mining areas of the Ruhr, the port cities of the North and the large chemical industries. Rather than arguing that the "productive forces" should be managed in a more efficient way by the representatives of the working class—a view shared by Bolsheviks and Social Democrats alike—Luxemburg's program presented the abolition of the wage system as a precondition for the emancipation of workers:

> The naked decrees of socialization by the highest revolutionary authorities are by themselves empty phrases. Only the working class, through its own activity, can make the word flesh. […] From dead machines assigned their place in production by capital, the proletarian masses must learn to transform themselves into the free and independent directors of this process.[54]

In spite of significant points of agreement and existing personal ties between them, the political outlook of the Spartacists was substantially different from that of the Bolsheviks, who remained much more tied to the tradition of the Second International. There were also relevant differences in what concerns the practical circumstances in which they operated. Even though soldiers' and workers' councils were formed in both countries, Germany was not a "weak link in the imperialist chain," as Lenin had defined the Russian Empire, and it had not experienced a military collapse on the same scale. This allowed the emergence of a nationalist myth, according to which an undefeated army had been "stabbed in the back" by leftist politicians. Furthermore, since the abdication of the Kaiser had coincided with the armistice, most of the soldiers could be quickly demobilized and the power vacuum was considerably easier to fill. The German Revolution was not a "failed" attempt to follow the Russian example. It formed an entirely different chain of events, the outcome of which could not be anticipated by those who participated in it.

In this regard, it is worth looking at two important aspects of the Berlin uprising of January 1919. The first concerns the notion of a "Spartacist week," that is, a putsch conducted under the leadership of the newly-founded KPD, completely isolated from the masses of Berlin workers. This was the dominant version of events propagated by Social Democrats, Liberals, Conservatives and Nationalists, the leitmotiv of a counter-revolutionary narrative that, not unlike the Bolshevik mythological machine, portrayed the image of the Berlin uprising as a repetition of Russian events with a different outcome. With the benefit of hindsight, we know that Liebknecht and Pieck were the only KPD members to participate in the "Revolutionary Committee" formed on the evening of 5 January, and that the "Revolutionary Delegates" (*Revolutionären Obleute*) associated with the USPD enjoyed an overwhelming majority in it.[55] But the mythology of a "Spartacus week" was not merely the result of an error of historical interpretation. It expressed the hatred nurtured by the SPD and the military high command toward Luxemburg and Liebknecht. As leading Spartacists, they had to be shot down, not because they were pulling the strings of the uprising, but because they symbolized the struggle against war and the denunciation of the SPD's complicity in it. Additionally, their writings expressed, with remarkable clarity, a diffuse feeling that prevailed amongst the working class, expressed in the motto "All Power to the Worker's Councils." This aspiration to self-government, equality and internationalism, denounced throughout Europe as "Bolshevism," was translated into German as "Spartacism."

The second aspect that we must take into consideration concerns what Broué described as a "deep current of radicalization of the Berlin workers."[56] This radicalization had manifested itself in the strike waves

of the war period, culminating in the mass demonstrations that led to the abdication of the Kaiser. After a series of street clashes that followed the abdication, it reached a peak during the "Christmas crisis," when Berlin workers took up arms in support of the revolutionary sailors from the People's Naval Division, thereby forcing the government and the high command of the army abandon their intention of seizing control of the capital. By early January, thousands of Berlin workers had been instructed in the school of spontaneity and mass action, and the immediate experience of "revolt" was much more familiar to them than the overarching design of "revolution." This allows us to understand the pace at which events unfolded.

By sacking Eichborn, the USPD leader who acted as chief of police in Berlin, the government pursued a deliberate strategy of confrontation, with the aim of reinstating its authority. An act of protest was called by the organizations to the left of the SPD, quickly escalating into an uprising. After a massive demonstration of hundreds of thousands of workers, on the morning of January 5, a few hundred armed men occupied some buildings (mainly printing presses), convinced that a decisive moment had arrived. As an armed clash became inevitable, time suddenly gained a unique quality:

> During the first fifteen days of January 1919, the experience of time changed in Berlin. For four years the war had suspended the usual rhythm of life. Every hour had become an hour of waiting—waiting for the next move (one's own or the enemy's). These were all instants in a greater wait, the wait for victory. In the first days of January 1919, that wait, which had matured over the previous four years, appeared to have been fulfilled by the sudden and tremendously brief apparition of an atypical time in which everything that happened—with extreme speed—seemed to happen for ever. It was no longer a matter of living and acting in the framework of tactics and strategy, within which intermediate objectives could be immensely distant from the final objective and yet prefigure it—the greater the distance, the more anxious the wait. "Now or never!" One had to act once and for all, and the fruit of the action was the content of the action itself. Every decisive choice, every irrevocable action, meant being in agreement with time; every hesitation, to be out of time. When it all ended, some of the real protagonists had left the stage for ever.[57]

The notion of a change in the experience of time, with its obvious messianic resonance, conferred upon the uprising a singular character. This was not a date previously set on a calendar, a carefully planned choreography of deliberate steps synchronized according to sound military principles. But to define the Berlin uprising by what it lacked is to miss the opportunity to understand how it was lived by those who partici-

pated in it. Once the insurrection broke out, *the Spartakusbund ceased to act as a party and simply became, as Jesi put it, a "flag for revolt,"* a symbol of the determination to fight under unfavorable odds.[58] After three days punctuated by solemn calls for unity of the parties of the Left, what had started as a rather bloodless mass movement gave way to increasingly violent confrontation. In the process, Berlin was converted into a laboratory for counter-insurgency, according to a strategy conceived by the military high command and backed by the SPD. This consisted of the employment of heavily-armed units of volunteers, the *Freikorps,* composed of hardened war veterans and enthusiastic young nationalists, alongside the few remaining reliable units of the army. Deployed through an extremely effective transportation and communications system, with enough speed to ensure an overwhelming tactical superiority, these detachments were specifically conceived for civil war, and would later be deployed in the Ruhr, central Germany and Hamburg with exactly the same outcome.[59] Rather than a failed attempt to re-enact the storming of the Winter Palace, the Berlin uprising marked the beginning of a new and unprecedented age of counter-insurgency, successfully applied in other European cities thereafter, in the course of a bloody "European civil war."[60]

In the last days before being killed, already in hiding, Luxemburg acknowledged the fact that the fate of the uprising had been condemned in advance.[61] But she also stressed the fact that a "revolution did not develop evenly of its own volition, in a clear field of battle, according to a cunning plan devised by clever strategists." "The masses," she added, were the "the rock on which the ultimate victory of the revolution" would be built, and following them into action had been the only politically acceptable choice. For his part, Liebknecht portrayed the coming revolution in an unmistakably messianic and apocalyptic tone:

> Spartacus stands for the fire and the spirit, the soul and the heart, the will and the deed of the proletarian revolution. Spartacus stands for all the misery, longing, and determination of the class-conscious proletariat. Spartacus stands for socialism and world revolution. […] The clatter of the imminent economic collapse will awake the sections of the proletariat that are still asleep. They will hear the trumpets of Judgment Day, and the corpses of the murdered fighters will rise from the dead to demand justice from the cursed traitors of the revolution. Today, the volcano is still rumbling underground—tomorrow it will erupt and bury them all in ashes and lava![62]

The image of a volcano rumbling underground once again linked the German Revolution to the slave rebellions of antiquity. It is precisely that connection that reveals the historical meaning of both events. Just

like the *bellum Spartacium*, the Berlin uprising was located on a historical threshold, just as a new configuration of modernity was emerging, characterized by capitalist concentration, mass politics and industrial warfare. It was against this catastrophic course of history, anticipated by Rosa Luxemburg with exceptional foresight, that a brief suspension of time allowed the myth of Spartacus to reappear, as an image of the past flashing up in a moment of danger.

Conclusion

Because it elides the distinction between different epochs, "anachronism" is seen as a capital sin by most historians. But anachronism can also correspond to the employment of fictional characters and imaginary events in historical narrative, reminding us of the fact that historians need to use their imagination to conceptualize the past, and thereby calling into question the relation of the discipline with the "truth."[63] In this sense, myths can become powerful historical devices, capable of shaping the perception of time and inspiring political agency. By summoning Spartacus in the midst of World War I, displacing him from his original historical setting and converting him into a symbol of rebellion, the Spartacists were performing a political operation, detaching themselves from the victors of class struggle. The choice of Spartacus as an archetype outlined a genealogy of domination and exploitation that reached back to ancient times and underpinned the very notion of "civilization" (it is worth noting that the rulers of the German and the Russian empires both named themselves after "Caesar"). Since, as Reinhart Koselleck observes, temporality lies at the heart of political struggle, framing its conditions of possibility, it cannot but interfere with the living present.[64] In this regard, the Berlin uprising cannot be understood without taking into account the messianic conception of time that inspired those who participated in it.

The Spartacists were much more inclined than the Bolsheviks to rely on the spontaneity of the working class and on its ability to self-organize in order to struggle against exploitation and oppression. Which is why, once historical events started to unfold in an untimely and unpredictable manner, the Spartakusbund simply became a "flag of revolt." Identifying themselves with the demand of "All power to the Soviets," Spartacists were perceived as an existential threat by both the SPD government officials and the high command of the German army. Their physical elimination, along with that of the radicalized workers of Berlin, was a precondition for the re-establishment of "normal time." And, because the memory of the uprising could not but haunt the newly-established Republic, it had to be recast as a "failed revolution," the tragic result of a deliberate choice based on poor calculation. In this sense, it is revealing that both the enemies of the Spartacists and some

of the most prominent leaders of the Communist International converged in the appreciation of their defeat. In the course of time, the historical interpretation of the Berlin uprising would be subsumed within the mythology of Bolshevism, blurring the lines between "revolt" and "revolution." Exploring anachronism in order to cast a different light upon the revolts of antiquity and modernity, moving across the boundaries of historical compartmentalization, allows us to address the event from an alternative angle.

Of course, subtracting the thoughts and actions of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht from a specific mythology does not imply restoring their "true" meaning, nor is this the task of historical interpretation. This reinterpretation merely aims at rendering intelligible what inspired those thoughts and actions. In this regard, the choices that led Luxemburg, Liebknecht—and thousands of others—to their deaths were dictated by a specific temporality, that "sudden and tremendously brief apparition of an atypical time in which everything that happened—with extreme speed—seemed to happen forever."[65] The "myth of Spartacus" had reemerged as a messianic prophecy, providing the plot and setting the stage for what Jesi called the "untimeliness of revolt."[66] As events unfolded, the streets of Berlin became charged with splinters of messianic time, prompting the insurgents to an irrevocable choice. It was no longer, as noted by Jesi, a matter of living and acting within the framework of tactics and strategy. In the face of danger, those who took up arms sensed that only an arrest of happening—a break with the *continuum* of history—could put an end to the catastrophe that was already underway.

Notes

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49. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital* (London: Routledge, 1951) , 446.

50. On the repressive apparatus created against German workers, see Karl Heinz Roth, *L'altro Movimento Operaio. Storia dalla Repressione Capitalistica in Germania del 1880 fino a oggi* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1976), 41–55.
51. Rober Looker (Ed.), *Rosa Luxemburg: Selected Political Writings* (London: Cape, 1972), 271–274. In ancient mythology, the "*Acheron*" was the river that ran towards Hades.
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53. Rosa Luxemburg, *Selected Political Writings* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 366–367.
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